
A CONVERSATION WITH EMPORIUM DESIGN



By Patri / 25 Aug 2015

Eons ago, John and Patri went to architecture school at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) with Tim Welsh and Robert Stansell III. We, at AcV2, have been keeping track of their practice, Emporium Design, for a while now, enjoying their project updates and admiring their work. They graciously agreed to be interviewed for our site. I hope you all enjoy.

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AcV2: It's been a while! Thank you for agreeing to do this. This is completely self-serving since we have been fans of your work for a while and we really value architects that are not afraid of a messy remodel.

Let's start at the beginning: when did the two of you start Emporium? Did you start it because of a specific opportunity, or were you starting from scratch? Were you both already working in New York at the time?

Tim & Robert: The idea of "Emporium Design" was actually born in Troy, NY — as a sleep-deprived college student, "wouldn't it be cool if.." conversation focused on the idea and benefits of a single entity being "one stop shop" of sorts: architecture, interior design, graphic design, furniture and lighting fabrication, and construction.

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Blind Barber – NYC

Six or seven years later, while both working long hours in corporate architecture firms in NYC, some friends were opening a new bar/lounge in a trendy area of town and asked for our help. GalleryBar was very well received; Ella Lounge and two Blind Barbers (first in NYC, then a second in LA) followed over the course of the next few years — all during nights and weekends.

In 2012, we were presented with an opportunity to develop a restaurant brand on a prominent East Village corner. We were being charged with developing the name, brand and the concept, as well as the design and construction of the new space — which included quite a bit of custom fabrication.

Despite both of our wives being pregnant (first for both) at the time, we resigned from our corporate positions and went full-steam ahead on Emporium Design and our new gastro-pub concept, Boulton and Watt.

Emporium Design wasn't just a crazy college idea anymore.

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Boulton & Watt

AcV2: It seems that in a short amount of time, you have created a very strong “brand” if not a distinct style through many of these projects. I would call it industrial, but that is probably an oversimplification.

Emporium: We’ve heard “industrial” and “industrial chic,” but don’t particularly care for that terminology. Soon after starting a project, we research the history of the building and do some probing to determine if there are opportunities to embrace unique “bones” of the space or structure. We have been fortunate that many of our recent projects have presented amazing opportunities to celebrate the building’s past lives and amazing architectural features. Occasionally, we’ll actually remove more than we add.

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JMC Holdings

AcV2: How deliberate was it for you to create a specific design palette?

Emporium: Our primary goal is to deliver what the client desires. It just so happened that the industrial-inspired barber shop we created for the original Blind Barber location was very well received by the client and patrons.

Our industrial design palette grew from there, but it certainly wasn't deliberate. Although, it's also not surprising as we've dreamt of retrofitting an old warehouse for years.

AcV2: Of the projects completed so far, for which were you able to deliver the most comprehensive design package? And can you describe why that is important to your clients?

Emporium: By far Boulton & Watt was the most comprehensive design project we've completed to date. We sat in our "trailer" next door and were able to sketch out details and have them built the same afternoon. There were no disconnects between our finished drawing sets and the construction because we we're the contractor, or at least we hired the subs. We were also

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investors and had put a significant capital investment into the project. When clients hear this they have greater confidence that we know where to allocate funds to make the biggest design impact.



Boulton & Watt. Before

AcV2: One of Patri's *favorite* things about remodels is unforeseen circumstances – she lives for them. What has been your most challenging unforeseen circumstance and how did you deal with the design challenge?

Emporium: One of the projects that we're most proud of is "Boulton & Watt", gastro-pub on a very busy corner of the Lower East Side of Manhattan. As usually the case with hospitality projects, the ownership group signed the lease and wanted to get started with construction right away. We came up with a brand, a concept, and a design in a few sleepless days — which involved a very detailed logic for the restoration of the exterior brick and the placement of the entry, windows, etc., being sure to utilize the existing masonry openings wherever possible. Well, only hours into demolition the exterior walls began to crumble — years of graffiti and grime built up on the facade hid the fact that a good portion of the exterior was actually 3/8" thick veneer brick on moldy, dank plywood (see picture above). Needless to say, we removed all of it and started the exterior from scratch. It was a blessing that worked out wonderfully well — the huge, hinged custom blackened steel windows have become a big hit, especially in the spring and early fall.



Boulton & Watt. After

AcV2: Sounds like you two have a more “out there” work environment than we do. What’s the funniest thing that’s happened to you on a project.

Emporium: We were in “all hands on deck” mode, putting finishing touches on a project near Madison Square Garden, “American Whiskey”, right before their opening. As is often the case on our project, we take on certain custom fabrication ourselves. We like to roll up our sleeves and get into it. Tim was applying a custom blackening solution on steel trim, which expedites the oxidation process and results in a beautiful patina in just moments. One of the owners, a very popular starting pitcher for the NY Yankees, had been quietly following Tim around in awe — before finally asking for a lesson. Hours (and a few beers) later, they had both completed the trim. The pitcher had a start the next day and got shelled.

And on that note... Thank you so much to Tim and Robert for agreeing to do this. And thank you all for hanging out with us. Now head over to emporiumdesign.com and enjoy their work!

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